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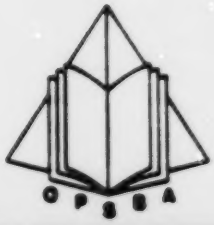
ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION

SUBMISSION TO COMMISSION OF INQUIRY ON CANADIAN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

November 22, 1990



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CONTENTS

Introduction 1

Institutional Issues 2

Participation-related Issues 3

Teaching-related Issues 9

Issues of Relevance and Curriculum 11

Coordination and Cooperation 12

Appendix - Call for Presentations & Submissions

Introduction:

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association represents 94 public school boards in Ontario. The timelines imposed by the Commission of Inquiry precluded OPSBA preparing a submission based on careful research. However, this paper draws on the experience and observation of elected boards and senior administrators. It necessarily reflects the views of those charged with the responsibility for the elementary and secondary education of students who have and will continue to become university students. In addition, this paper is informed by our view that the universities are public institutions that play a necessary and vital role in our democratic society.

In its call for presentations and submissions the Commission notes:

> "Highly qualified persons, who play key roles in ensuring the country's social and economic well-being, are the products of our universities."

OPSBA concurs with this statement of fact but points out that the universities also play a significant role in ensuring the cultural, spiritual and moral well-being of the country. These responsibilities must be assumed in the context of our bilingual and multicultural character.

We make no apology for a submission from a provincial perspective. We trust that you will receive the views of the school boards of the other provinces and territories from our sister associations.

We have used the framework set out in the call for presentations, dealing only with those issues on which we feel qualified to comment. We have adopted your numbering system for ease of reference.

A. Institutional Issues

1-2. Our comments are general. The series of questions posed will no doubt be addressed by the universities themselves. We are fully aware that universities (and colleges) identify inadequate funding as a major barrier to improving both the access and success of students to higher education. The schools, too, complain of inadequate resources to meet the demands of the day. However we do believe that issues such as the evaluation of programs, and priorities for the allocation of existing resources should be examined irrespective of funding needs.

We are concerned that the effects of the financial restraints faced by universities over the last ten or so years are borne primarily by the undergraduate students and in particular those in the first years of degree programs. Few can have failed to have heard the stories about extremely large first year classes in general arts and science programs at Ontario's largest universities. OPSBA believes that the early experience of university students whether coming from secondary schools or from the workplace makes a significant difference in the process of adjustment to university education. Students who do not make personal connections with their teachers are at greater risk for dropping out than those who come to feel a part of the university community. It may well be that smaller classes in the first years and larger classes in the later years would have a positive effect on the quality of education, the quality of the university experience and the attrition rate.

7. We believe that an "international dimension" is essential to high quality education. This may be truer than ever before as we move towards the twenty-first century. It is not the economy alone that is experiencing "globalization", but all facets of our national life - culture, communications, government. Just as Canada benefits from its own students who study abroad so must it make available to others the benefits of a Canadian education. We believe that there is a moral imperative to welcome foreign students. Their presence and participation can enrich the university experience of Canadian students. Relatively small numbers of foreign students attend universities yet we are aware that some Canadians believe that they take places away from Canadian students. It would be helpful if universities reported more fully to the public on this situation. We fear that visible minority Canadians or immigrants new to Canada are often viewed as "foreigners".

B. Participation-related Issues

1. There can be little doubt that various groups in society- native Canadians, visible minorities, disabled persons, franco-Ontarians and in some cases women - are under-enrolled in university programs. Significant attention has been focused in recent years on the under-enrollment of women so that major improvements in participation rates have been achieved in a number of programs and professional fields. In some cases this has been assisted by the removal of barriers to entrance but by and large it may well be a result of the changed expectation of society in general and women in particular. The increase in the participation rate of women in some fields of traditional male endeavour, eg. mathematics, engineering, has been relatively small. We

believe that universities should review practices that might limit the participation of specific groups and should introduce new programs or practices to ensure that members of under-represented groups can be successful in university.

University enrolment has increased dramatically over the last thirty years. Current Ontario data indicates that 25% of students leaving high school go to university. Whether this increase has been accompanied by a significant change in the make up of the student body is less clear.

The reasons for the lower participation rates of some groups are complex. While the relationship between socio-economic status and school success has been known for many years, little change in overall achievement patterns has been obtained. Since school success is, for most students, the prerequisite for university entrance, the schools themselves have a major responsibility for improving university participation rates. But all mainstream public institutions have created systemic barriers to access which are often difficult to identify and harder to remove. We suggest that the following questions are worthy of investigation:

- **Are the criteria for university entrance valid?**
- **Are application and selection processes more likely to screen out students from some groups while advantaging others?**
- **Are issues of racism and sexism in all facets of university life being addressed with sufficient vigour?**
- **Are there sufficient programs and support services in place to address specific needs of some groups?**
- **Are employment equity programs being developed in each institution?**
- **How effective is OSAP in overcoming financial barriers to participation by students from low-income families?**

2. We are uneasy about the link made in this question between enrolment expansion and lowered level of learning ability. Since to our knowledge "learning ability" has not been measured, we suspect that the question intends to raise the issue of whether or not standards of achievement have been lowered as a result of increasing participation rates. We suspect not. Rather, we believe that the university has the responsibility for establishing and maintaining appropriate standards and ensuring that students have every opportunity to meet them. Increasing enrolments have increased the diversity amongst learners - background, personal qualities, motivation, learning styles. The university must adapt its organization, programs, teaching arrangements, evaluation of achievement and student services in response to the growing diversity of the student body.

3. Ontario universities have made significant adjustments to meet the needs of part-time learners. However, to date most part-time programs are simply full-time programs taken in a part-time mode. We believe that part-time education is likely to become the common mode for the organization of adult education and as such should cease to be an add-on to the core fulll-time activities. It is still the case that some programs particularly professional and post-graduate programs are not available to part-time students. Why?

We also question the necessity of credential requirements being the same for full-time and part-time learners. Many part-time students are working in fields directly related to their part-time studies. We believe that credit should be granted for knowledge and skills acquired outside of university courses. This may sometimes be the case in gaining admittance to programs but rarely is such credit applied to studies within the program of study.

The support of the universities and their involvement in the Prior Learning Assessment Program as recommended by the Ontario Task Force on Admission to the Professions and Vision 2000: Quality and Opportunity is urgently required. We believe this is not simply a matter of fairness to students but also a question of the wise use of limited resources. Public dollars ought not to be spent on teaching someone what she/he already knows!

Student support services normally made available to full-time students should be made available to part-timers too. We suggest that further expansion of "distance-education" opportunities should be undertaken if part-time learners throughout the province are to have equal opportunity for higher education. We wonder whether it is time to seriously consider the development of a Canadian "Open University" since television has become ubiquitous. With our vast distances and scattered populations, our growing regionalization and our need for a more highly educated population, the possibility of an "Open University" developed by a consortium of universities across Canada, seems to us an exciting one.

4. OPSBA suspects that the student attrition rate is too high. It is true that some benefit accrues to the individual who has taken some university courses but real benefit, in economic terms accrues to those who obtain the credential. Further, we believe that the investment by the public in post-secondary education demands a reduction in attrition rates. Far be it for the school boards to be severe critics of the universities. However, we offer the following suggestions aimed at reducing attrition rates.

Secondary School

- Secondary school evaluation of students is important. The renewed emphasis on appropriate methods of student evaluation described in each curriculum guideline for the Ontario Academic Courses can be expected, over time, to decrease the discrepancies between reported achievement from one jurisdiction or school to another. For example, we believe the research and practical experience in OAC English indicates that an appropriate measure of standardization can be achieved without the expense and negative consequences of Provincial examinations. We suggest that the involvement of university representatives in development of the new OAC Curriculum Guidelines will have a beneficial effect in the preparation for first year university studies. We suggest that all university first year programs should be reviewed in light of these new guidelines so that expectations for the prior learning of students are realistic. We wonder about the experience of out-of-province students in this regard.

Evaluation of University Achievement

- We believe that a thorough examination of the methods of evaluation of student achievement in the universities needs to be undertaken. Students report too much reliance on the use of multiple choice techniques that trivialize learning and tend to measure the retention of disjointed facts, lack of clear evaluation criteria, or substantial differences in expectations professors and, sadly, an attitude on the part of some professors that "first year students should be put in their place."

We believe that the absence of clear criteria, and expectations together with the desire or need to give many first year students low marks contributes to the first year drop out rate. We suspect that some students drop out when they no longer expect to succeed.

Student Workload

o The reorganization of the high school credit program under Ontario Schools: Intermediate and Senior (OSIS) held out the possibility of secondary school students obtaining the Ontario Secondary Graduation Diploma (OSGD) including the six OAC's required for university entrance, in four years. Experience has shown this to be the pattern for very few university-bound students. More common is the completion of university prerequisites in four and a half or five years. Students may obtain more credits than the minimum or opt for reduced workloads in the last two years of secondary school. We suggest that two issues emerge. Firstly, it may be advisable for more universities to establish first year entry at the beginning of the second semester. Secondly, the reduced workload may leave students with an unrealistic expectation about the amount of work required in a full first year university program.

The reduced credit load of some students in the senior school years may be of benefit in allowing more time for participation in extra-curricular and wage-earning activities. This may be a time of valuable personal growth.

We suggest that the work load required for success in the first year of undergraduate degree programs needs to be reviewed. We suspect that what students often experience as unreasonable demands, particularly in some sciences, can contribute to their selection of "easier options". We believe that a review by each university should result in the establishment of "norms" for in-class, laboratory and out-of-class work. We know of students who drop out because they "can't hack it". First year programs should be designed to make the likelihood of completion and entry to second year programs the expectation for a very significant majority of students. It seems that too many students experience the

first year as the real selection process which determines who will obtain a degree and who will not.

It may be time for schools and universities to challenge the norm of direct entry to university from high school and to place greater value on experience gained from a year or more away from institutionalized learning, that can contribute to personal maturity.

C. Teaching-related Issues

1. OPSBA believes that the quality of teaching is of profound importance to a good university education. Education is a human endeavour. What is learned is very much a result of the social interaction between teacher and learner and between learners. It may well be that the quality of teaching is the most significant determinant of the quality of university education. Teachers are not simply the source of knowledge. Good teachers have the power to motivate, to stimulate, to provide alternative viewpoints, to challenge students to think better and to communicate more clearly.

Ontario sets lofty expectations for education in our schools. We are to help students to "think clearly, feel deeply and act wisely". These attributes should be nurtured in all students at all levels of education. These human attributes are acquired through teaching and learning.

We now have a considerable body of knowledge about effective teaching. Indeed the universities themselves have been the sponsors of much of the recent research on teaching and learning. Educators now talk about the "principles of adult learning" and seek to incorporate these principles in programs for adults. These developments have most frequently been observed in programs for disadvantaged or undereducated

adults but we believe that our knowledge of effective education for adults should inform the teaching practice of the universities.

2. We suggest that undervaluing of teaching is common in universities. The notion of "publish or perish" has its origin in fact. It seems to us that the often reported excessively large first year classes are an indication that undergraduate teaching is not the highest priority in the allocation of resources. We believe that the research function of universities is critical, but do not believe that the trade-offs that will remain a fact of life should favour research over teaching.

   Perhaps the quality of teaching should be a significant component of assessment for tenure and professional appraisal. Why should university professors not be able to make university teaching the central focus of their work?

   The prestige accorded to teaching will not be improved until the improvement of the quality of undergraduate education and experience is made a higher priority by each institution.

3. OPSBA believes that a variety of measures can be employed to improve teaching methods. We do not advocate the introduction of formal "pre-service" certification programs for university teachers. However, we suggest that introductory short courses should be introduced. The issue of preparation of new teachers has arisen in Ontario's colleges. We suggest that the models developed for orientation programs for new teachers are equally appropriate for university teachers. In fact, perhaps universities and colleges should collaborate in the provision of these programs since individual institutions might have too few new teachers for whom to mount a program. As well,

collaborative models for "in-service" programs should be explored, and more informal methods such as discussions by faculty about teaching might be useful.

It seems odd that universities in Ontario which are responsible for the training of school teachers through the Faculties of Education appear to have paid little attention to the preparation or support of their own teachers.

4. We have no comment on the evaluation of university teachers. Suffice it to say that we believe that students' ratings of teaching is valid and that significant weight should be given to them. We have heard complaints about the uselessness of processes that gather student opinions but, to their knowledge, are not used as a tool to improve performance or reward excellence.

D. Issues of Relevance and Curriculum

The first two questions concerning the relevance of university education focus narrowly on the economic interests of students and the training needs of employers. We believe that direct preparation for employment is only one of the goals of an undergraduate education and may not be the primary one. University education, no matter in what program or discipline, should result in graduates who think clearly and critically, who can write and speak well for a variety of audiences, and who can act as informed and compassionate citizens. We believe that all undergraduate programs should require sufficient general education in arts, sciences and humanities to achieve these outcomes.

We suggest that shortages of graduates in certain fields of study - particularly mathematics and science - have their origins in elementary and secondary school. While this concern is being addressed, we suggest that greater efforts by universities to

reach out to potential students earlier in their school careers, say grade eight, might be helpful.

OPSBA wishes to raise the issue of opportunities for French first language and French Immersion graduates of our high schools. Very significant public investment has been made in these programs. We are concerned that the benefit to individuals and society of this investment is limited if young people are not provided with opportunities to continue at least some of their university studies in courses where French is the language of instruction. We believe that universities should expand their course offerings in French.

E. Coordination and Cooperation

1. We respect the historical level of autonomy of Ontario's universities and believe that it has largely served us well. We believe that some further coordination may be necessary if students and society are to be better served in times of severe financial constraint. We have no comment on appropriate mechanisms for achieving greater cooperation and/or coordination.

2. We will comment only on the potential for the development of joint programs between colleges and universities. The mandate of colleges varies from province to province. For Ontario, we believe that this question should be answered within the context of Vision 2000, Quality and Opportunity- A Review of the Mandate of Ontario's Colleges (1990). We believe that this Report developed through an extensive consultative and participatory process, provides sensible recommendations for the development of partnerships between colleges and universities.

We suggest that the recommendations of Vision 2000, when implemented, could over time have a significant impact on who goes to college and who goes to university. Secondary students favour university over college education. We believe that this is in part due to the fact that few opportunities exist for the combining of college education with that of the university. We suggest that clear opportunities to gain university credit for college credits and the development of joint programs between colleges and universities will have significant benefit. Such arrangements will, without doubt, meet some of our needs for more advanced training.

We suggest that such strategies will make university education more accessible to groups who are currently under enrolled in university programs. The student body of the colleges is more diverse than that of the universities. By creating "doors between the walls" of our post-secondary institutions it seems reasonable to expect that some of those for whom the barriers have been impenetrable, will walk through.

3. The secondary schools are significantly influenced by the universities. Indeed one of the concerns of colleges and employers is that secondary teaching is dominated by those whose experience is limited to the universities. The need to renew teacher education programs has been clearly identified in Ontario. Any renewal will take place through the Faculties of Education.

Universities influence secondary education in both formal and informal ways. New teachers bring with them the philosophies, the knowledge and the techniques that they acquired in university. As we enter a period of increasing hiring of teachers we can expect this source of influence to

become more pronounced. Many teachers continue to attend university programs while they are teaching. University professors are frequent presenters at professional conferences for teachers. As well some elementary and secondary school teachers teach in Faculty of Education programs.

University faculty have been involved with teachers in developing new curriculum guidelines in Ontario. Opportunities for connection between secondary schools and universities are to be welcomed. May we suggest that there is a significant benefit to be gained by increasing the influence that secondary schools have on the universities? We believe that secondary education may have much contribute to the improvement of teaching, student evaluation and curricular design in the universities.

In conclusion, OPSBA appreciates the opportunity to make this submission to the Commission of Inquiry on Canadian University Education. Our presentation is not exhaustive. We have tried to restrict our observations to those matters in which school boards have direct experience. Should you require further elaboration on issues raised, we would be pleased to provide it.

Appendix

COMMISSION OF INQUIRY
ON CANADIAN
UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

COMMISSION D'ENQUÊTE SUR
L'ENSEIGNEMENT UNIVERSITAIRE
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CALL FOR PRESENTATIONS AND SUBMISSIONS

This independent Commission of Inquiry, established under the auspices of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, invites presentations at public hearings to be held this fall (1990). In addition, the Commission invites written submissions pertinent to the topic.

Entering the last decade of the twentieth century, Canada must prepare for a future in which the country will depend, more than ever before, on its human resources. Highly qualified persons, who play key roles in ensuring the country's social and economic well-being, are the products of our universities. After the expansion of universities in the 1960s, with ever increasing enrolments, and after more than a decade of financial restraint, it is time to examine the quality of university education. How good is education in Canada's universities?

The aim of the Commission is to review the educational function of Canada's universities and to find ways by which universities can ensure that their educational program is first rate. To this end, the Commission is interested in receiving the views of individuals and organizations on the subject of its inquiry. We are especially interested in hearing from students and recent graduates. Comments on all issues relevant to Canadian university education are welcome, but the Commission especially invites responses to the following questions:

A. Institutional Issues

1. How high a place does the quality of education enjoy among the goals and priorities of Canadian universities, and does this differ from university to university?

2. What barriers to improving the quality of education exist within the university?

3. Aside from concern with teaching, what institutional practices should universities adopt to improve students' educational experience?

4. To what extent are programs and courses evaluated by universities? Are the results used in decisions concerning resource allocation?

5. What examples exist at Canadian universities of specific efforts to improve educational quality? Are there some innovative undergraduate programs? What has been the recent experience with instructional technology?

6. What has been the effect, if any, of continued financial restraint on the quality and adaptability of university education? By what mechanism has any such effect been produced? Are there any possible funding options that would result in improvement in educational quality?

7. To what extent does high quality university education require an international dimension? How important are international activities, including the presence of foreign students, to the educational experience at Canadian universities?

8. What evidence exists regarding anticipated changes in the age distribution of faculty members and the possible impact of these changes on university education? If measures need to be taken to deal with this matter, what are they and what factors affect the capability of universities to take such measures?

B. Participation-related Issues

1. Are various groups in society under-enrolled in Canadian universities or in certain university programs and, if so, what is the nature of any barriers and how can they be removed?

2. Is there any evidence that the expansion of enrolment in the past few decades has meant, on average, a lower level of learning ability among the students?

3. Are universities keeping up with the demand for part-time and continuing education opportunities?

4. Is the student attrition rate at Canadian universities too high? What can be done to reduce it?

C. Teaching-related Issues

1. Among the factors that contribute to a good university education, how important is the quality of teaching?

2. Are there measures that could be taken to improve the prestige accorded to teaching and to successful teachers at our universities?

3. Is there a tendency for experienced professors to be released from the duties of teaching undergraduates and for those duties to be taken over by less experienced persons? If so, is this detrimental to the quality of education received?

4. What measures can be taken to improve the teaching methods of university faculty members?

5. How can the quality of teaching be evaluated? As to student ratings of the teaching they receive, how should these ratings be conducted and what importance should be accorded to them?

D. Issues of Relevance and Curriculum

1. How can the continuing relevance of university education to the needs of Canadian society and the Canadian economy best be ensured? Should graduates and their employers be surveyed regularly (say four years after graduation) and, if so, how can this best be accomplished?

2. By what means can universities obtain timely indication of shortages of graduates in particular fields of study? What factors affect responsiveness to such detected shortages?

3. To what extent are undergraduates being forced to specialize at the expense of a broad educational exposure?

4. Are there certain skills that all university graduates should possess (e.g. oral and written self-expression)? If so, how should these skills be taught, and their acquisition evaluated?

E. Coordination and Cooperation

1. Assuming each university had a clearly defined mission, collected data regarding the success of its efforts, and demonstrated sufficient flexibility to act upon any feedback received, would this guarantee a higher education system without gaps or inequities? If in addition, some coordination is required, should that be a role for government or should it be delegated, in whole or in part, to a supra-university body in each province?

2. What potential exists for cooperative educational programs arranged jointly by universities and community colleges?

3. What is the impact of universities on the teaching quality and the educational practices of secondary schools and what can be done to improve coordination between those levels of education?

4. What is the significance to universities of the existence of higher education opportunities offered by private bodies such as corporations?

If you wish to make a presentation to the Commission at one of its hearings this fall, please contact us as soon as possible, but not later than two weeks before the hearing at which you wish to appear. **Contact person: Jeffrey Holmes (613) 238-5778, fax (613) 235-8237.**

The schedule of hearings is as follows:

Quebec City	October 17
St. John's	October 19
Montreal	October 22-23
Halifax	October 25
Vancouver	November 6
Edmonton	November 8
Saskatoon	November 9
Winnipeg	November 20
Toronto	November 22-23
Ottawa	December 4-5.

In Quebec City and Montreal, the hearings will be conducted in French; in Ottawa, they will be bilingual; elsewhere, English will be used. At all meetings, however, briefs will be accepted in either official language and people will be free to make presentations and answer questions in the language of their choice. There will be no simultaneous translation, however.

The Commission will schedule up to 10 minutes for presentation and up to 20 minutes for discussion with the Commissioner for each confirmed speaker or group. Presenters are urged to speak to their material, not to read it.

As for other submissions, we invite you to send these to the Commission before December 30th, 1990. Where possible, the Commission would appreciate receiving your views not only on paper but also on diskette (5¼ inches, WordPerfect).